



# AUDACIOUS IDEAS

THOUGHTS ABOUT HOW TO CHANGE BALTIMORE FOR THE BETTER



## Shrink jails and increase services for women who need them

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Crime is falling in Baltimore and fewer women are being held in the Baltimore city jail. Plans developed several years ago to build a large women's jail facility at a cost of roughly \$181 million were based on a prediction of increasing crime rates and higher jail populations that never materialized. Clearly, these plans should be shelved; state officials have said as much publicly. We believe building any new facility for women ignores the core problem: quite simply, too many people are in jail in Baltimore.

The *real* solution, and perhaps a more audacious one, is to commit to reducing the number of women, and people generally, being held in the Baltimore jail. But this leaves the difficult question, articulated by a community member who works with women at the detention center: "If not a new jail, then what?" The current facility, while improved recently, still has significant challenges. Having toured the facility personally, I know that areas for delivering health care should be upgraded, and there is little space for such activities as group classes or family visits. I wouldn't want my sister, daughter, mother or friend to spend a night there, let alone the months many women end up in jail awaiting trial.

Many of women currently in the jail shouldn't be. Over three-fourths of the women who were held on the jail on a given day in 2010 were there for non-violent offenses; over a third of these were arrested for drug offenses. Over half of women surveyed a few years ago upon leaving the jail indicated they had used heroine recently, while 59 percent had been diagnosed with depression and one third with bipolar disorder. While separate statistics are not available for women, we do know that over 17 percent of people at the jail for whom bail was an option were unable to make a \$5,000 bail (which equates to a \$500 bail bond). Is a jail—even a nicer jail—really the place for poor, mentally ill and drug addicted women who have been accused of nonviolent offenses?

The "what then," as we see it, is a comprehensive approach that results in jail being reserved only for the small number of people who are awaiting court and who pose a reasonable risk to public safety if they are released pretrial. This would include improved and expanded use of pretrial release supervision and services, which costs about \$2.50 per day versus the \$100 a day that a jail bed costs: **moving just 100 women a day to pretrial supervision for 30 days, the average amount of days until trial, could save Maryland \$292,000 per month—over \$3.5 million per year.** Streamlined court processes so women don't spend months waiting for their cases to be resolved, diverting more women with mental illnesses and substance dependence problems to treatment, and further reducing unnecessary arrests will also result in a smaller jail population. More funding should be invested in both "no-entry" services, particularly for youth, and re-entry services that increase a person's chance of success in the community. And improving conditions in the jail will reduce the harmful impacts of incarceration on those women who are detained. Implementing such an approach is complicated in Baltimore City because improving these services locally costs money, whereas any savings in terms of reduced jail size goes to the state. Another audacious idea would be for the state to re-invest savings reaped by a smaller jail into the Baltimore stakeholders who are providing the services that are making it possible to have fewer women in jail.

Baltimore can, and should, lock up fewer women in its jail. The system that exists doesn't do enough to address core social problems, doesn't strengthen communities, unnecessarily separates families, and certainly doesn't promote public safety. Instead of building a new jail, let's create a system that builds up and supports women inside and outside the facility, and focus on solutions that will make lasting improvements in Baltimore city.